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Bush Aides Assess the Contra Speculation

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 21 — Marlin Fitzwater, Vice President Bush's press secretary, still chuckles about the reporter who recently telephoned the Vice President's office, mentioned a man's name, then asked if the man worked for George Bush in Central America.

Mr. Bush, a former Director of Central Intelligence, has denied any involvement in directing a secret supply network for Nicaragua insurgents, known as contras. But speculation persists and, in Mr. Fitzwater's view, "It's reached a ridiculous level."

"Every freelance soldier in the Western Hemisphere says he works for George Bush," he added.

In recent days, the speculation has spread to include questions about whether Donald P. Gregg, Mr. Bush's national security adviser, serves as an Administration link to a rebel supply network. There have also been suggestions that Mr. Bush's son Jeb, the chairman of the Republican Party in Dade County, Florida, has been active in supplying military equipment to the rebels.

He denies running a supply operation but wants the rebels supported

Aides say the Vice President has not been damaged by the speculation since it underscores the perception that Mr. Bush, like others in the Reagan Administration, is strongly committed to the rebels seeking to topple the Marxist Government in Nicaragua.

"It seems to me that a lot of people on the right are applauding the fact that he is strongly for the contra movement," said a key Bush associate who asked not to be identified.

But still, some aides seem concerned about the impression that Mr. Bush might somehow be linked to a secret operation that, if conducted, would be in violation of American law.

Since denying that assertion at length at a news conference when it first surfaced, Mr. Bush has declined to disucss his role further. "We have said all there is to say," Mr. Fitzwater said. Mr. Gregg did not return telephone calls on the subject.

Mr. Fitzwater said Mr. Bush decided to meet the allegations head-on when they arose after a rebel supply plane was downed in Nicaragua two weeks ago and an American survivor, Eugene Hasenfus, was captured.

Mr. Hasenfus, who went on trial in Managua this week, asserted that he was associated with a man he identified as Max Gomez, who he said was an C.I.A. operative who ran supply shipments to the contras from an air base in El Salvador.

Mr. Gomez, whose actual name has been reported as Felix Rodriguez, is a Cuban-American who participated in the Bay of Pigs invasion and worked for the C.I.A. previously in Latin America and in Vietnam. Government officials have said that he is not currently employed by the agency.

Bush Terms Him a 'Patriot'

Mr. Bush entered the picture first when The San Francisco Examiner linked him to Mr. Gomez. The Vice President subsequently acknowledged at a news conference in Charleston, S.C., that he knew Mr. Gomez, having met with him several times. He termed him a "patriot."

Beyond that, Mr. Fitzwater confirmed that Mr. Gomez had been recommended for a job as a counter-insurgency specialist in the Salvadoran Air Force by Mr. Gregg, who worked at the C.I.A. as an operations officer from 1951 to 1979.

Mr. Bush denied "unequivocally" at the Charleston news conference that his office was running an operation to supply the contras and said that the only discussions he had had with Mr. Gomez were on other matters.

Giving Freedom a Chance

"The only discussions I have ever had with Felix relate to El Salvador," Mr. Bush said. "Now, if you want to ask am I glad that people are supporting the contras, yes. That's our policy, and we feel strongly that freedom should have a chance and democracy should have a chance."

Mr. Bush added: "For somebody to write as a nameless source that I was running an operation in Nicaragua is just flat untrue. And I'd like to encourage people to get those nameless sources out so we could have a chance to take a test as to who's telling the truth on this matter."

But Mr. Bush acknowledged that he was in a "Catch-22" situation, because "I want to see support for the contras."

In Mr. Fitzwater's opinion, the allegations are not damaging to the Vice President, because he met them by responding "quickly, honestly and on the record" and because they are groundless.

"The implication that the Vice President is directing and coordinating any kind operation is just not true and it's clear to everyone who has looked into it," he said.

Mr. Fitzwater also said that the only time Mr. Bush had met with leaders of the contras was when they visited the White House in March as part of the Administration's successful push to secure $100 million in military and nonlethal assistance for the rebels.

What has been particularly disturbing, aides to Mr. Bush say, are more recent reports that suggest that Jeb Bush might have been involved in efforts to supply arms to the contras. That assertion came last weekend in a CBS News report, which the younger Bush disputed.

Jeb Bush, 33, acknowledged in a telephone interview that he had participated in a number of programs conducted by Spanish-language radio stations in Miami to raise funds for the rebels. But he said the money generated was for nonlethal assistance.

"What I have done is a far cry from being part of a arms supply link to the contras," he said.

Although Administration officials outside the Vice President's office have generally left it up to Mr. Bush's staff to fend off the charges, some have suggested that they are being circulated as part of an attempt to undermine President Reagan's Central American policy.

It has also been speculated in the White House that Mr. Bush's own staff leaked suggestions about the Vice President's ties to the contras in hopes of bolstering his standing with the conservative right, which backs the guerrillas. Mr. Fitzwater and other staffers deny such duplicity.

A Button: 'Who Is Max Gomez?'

"It's a paradox, we've got people saying we put the story out and people saying that we are trying to stop the story," said another aide to Mr. Bush.

Mr. Fitzwater, a former Treasury and White House press spokeman who went to work for Mr. Bush last April, believes that the allegation involving the Vice President will in time "play itself out."

And he has opted to ride out any public storm that arises. In his office at the Executive Office Building is a button that says "Who is Max Gomez?"

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